

## THE CULTURE OF GENDER: SOCIALIZATION, SPIRITUALITY AND SEXUALITY

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In this presentation, I hope to take you on a journey through the social landscape which teaches us about spirituality and sexuality. Like any journey, this one will have its *ups* and *downs* and in this case both ups and downs come from the same source. That source is the recognition that what we can be as spiritual and sexual beings is both *enhanced* and *thwarted* by social pressures and expectations. Some aspects of this recognition we may wish we could overlook but, ultimately, if we are to guide others on similar journeys, we must face them squarely and realize that understanding the shifting aspects of our social world gives us ultimate power over ourselves and enables us to reach out to others.

Society and culture define and mould spirituality and sexuality. What is appropriate and acceptable versus what is weird, is socially constructed, mediated through our and others' interpretations of what is possible and what is good for us and for society. Often we act as if this is not so. In the case of spirituality, sometimes we act as if the definitions and rules of spiritual expression come to us from a completely different time and place, fully formed. Adjusting these definitions to fit our social time and place is seen by some purists as tampering with the sacred. Similarly, we act at times as if sexual expressions were totally natural, a direct manifestation of our biologies, and therefore the same the world around. Modifying what is seen as biological is thought, at least by some, to be as serious, if not more serious, as tampering with the sacred. In fact, the two realms are often tightly intertwined, as most of us well know.

The process by which we absorb images of appropriate spirituality and sexuality is the same one which gives us our gender identities. This process shapes us in profound and

intimate ways. It encourages some kinds of possibilities and discourages others. It forces us to take in, with our morning coffee, clearcut beliefs (which become manifest in subsequent rewarded behaviours), that we can be *only* what society lets us be. For women and for men, these beliefs and behaviours differ so substantially from each other that it is surprising that we can manage to communicate at all.

I would like to begin this journey with glimpses of the differences between female and male gender identities in our Canadian society and to explore the implications of these differences for our spirituality and sexuality. I will then explore a few of the linkages between sexuality and spirituality in our gendered society. The last part of the journey will address, hopefully in a creative way, what the future might hold.

### GENDER IDENTITY FOR OR AGAINST SPIRITUALITY AND SEXUALITY?

What, asks the nursery rhyme, are little girls made of? Double X chromosomes, child-bearing potential, maternal instinct, verbal ability and passivity would be the answer from modern social science. What then are little boys made of? An X chromosome and a Y chromosome, testosterone once they are older, insemination capability, beards (or at least 5 o'clock shadows), aggressiveness and mathematical/spatial ability. These are the modern equivalents of sugar and spice and everything nice for girls, and of snips and snails and puppy dogs tails for boys. Although few of us would really like to be made of something proven to be bad for us, like sugar, and perhaps fewer still would like to be made of snips and snails, one could argue that at least these building materials contain an element of

flexibility. Our modern conceptions of what boys and girls are made of, contain a strong element of immutability, of being stuck forever with the same biological baggage.

Despite the prevalent view in our society that our destinies, both female and male, are written in our anatomies, great efforts are expended to ensure that we turn out the way nature is thought to have intended. That nature seems to have quite different intentions in different parts of the world and within different ethnic and social groups in our own Canadian society is overlooked. The poor aging farmer in Saskatchewan who thinks his definition of masculinity is natural, would fall off his tractor to see what nature had in mind for young males on Toronto's Yonge Street! Nonetheless, we tend to see our socialization efforts, however bizarre they might seem to others or actually seem to some of us, as consistent with what nature intended.

Boys in our society tend to be taught toughness, competition, how to have power and control over others and most importantly, how *not* to be a girl. This last lesson is learned extremely well for boys. Some theorists have suggested that there is no clear image of how to be a man in our society, only the solid message that it involves the denial or suppression of any feminine tendencies. This may result, of course, in denial of one's individuality, or even humanness, in many instances. It can also foster feelings of repulsion or even disgust for the feminine, since those traits in boys are treated as unacceptable.

As boys internalize acceptable patterns of behaviour and grow up to become fathers themselves, the process becomes not only solidified, but exaggerated. Boys who root out their feminine attributes for caring, nurturing and giving of themselves to others, grow into men who prefer the company of other men at work, at the sports arena or at the pub. Absent fathers, or fathers who are absent even when they are physically present, provide poor role models to growing boys. Without real human role models, boys revert to modelling themselves on Mr. T, the Incredible Hulk or one or another Rambo clone. At the same time as they pattern themselves on celluloid caricatures, they consistently deny their feminine traits. Masculinity then comes to be defined in our society not by real human beings, but more by media creations.

Masculine socialization occurring on playing fields and in sports arenas, teaches boys to live by sports metaphors. They learn to "play the game", to be a "team player", to "horse-trade", to score, to win, but seldom to question the game they are playing. People come to be seen as other team members, as the embodiment of their roles rather than as people enacting roles. Men learn to become easy with the "I-it" relationship, or the instrumental role. They become less sensitive to their own needs, which are either denied as girlish or sacrificed for the good of the team's goals. Men become reluctant to tell others about what they feel and need, and equally reluctant to ask others how they feel.

Predicated as the male role is on such a narrow base, it is easy to imagine how sexual and spiritual expression could be compromised. Although the Don Juan complex, or the man as sexual machine, is commonly held in our society, sex can often be a substitute for caring. On male terms, sexuality becomes another game including carefully planned and staged game plays, passes, scoring and winning. It is the bedroom equivalent of a hockey game, in which winning takes priority and the sexual partner is to be "conquered" like an opposing team. In such circumstances, one can forget the sharing, caring and loving parts of sexual expression. The so-called sexual "revolution" of the 1960's elevated bedroom hockey to new heights: conquering and scoring became a male cultural ideal. Pursuit of this ideal means that it becomes difficult for men to care about their mates or partners, or even at times about themselves. It is only a short step further to recognition that men who find it difficult to love, will be difficult *to* love. Some men are so caught, as a result of the learned male role, in dissembling or "seeming to be" that even their wives will not know what they are or feel.

Life, for men socialized in this way, can lose both its connectedness to others and its meaning. When a man's self is so buried under layers of socially constructed protective armour, it allows for disease and death to gnaw away at him. This is rather like the deaths that are known to occur from ostracism by one's village in so-called primitive societies. In these instances, physical problems may be non-existent but the person dies anyway as a result of isolation from other people. Men, in fact, become so encumbered by the male social role in our society that it actually kills them. We

know men die at higher rates at every age than women in Canada, and are outlived by some ten years by women (McDaniel, 1986). In some ways, it could be argued that men's spirits become shrivelled by the social expectations of masculinity. Sexual gamemanship and empty breadwinning are tenuous bases indeed on which to construct a meaningful existence.

Women, in contrast to men, have some distinct advantages in acquiring their social identities. Unfortunately, the picture for women is far from rosy, but we shall begin with the good stuff. "Women's upbringing develops a feeling of context", says Ursula Franklin, the noted University of Toronto metallurgist and peace activist. Women are taught by social positioning in families and in society that they are links between the present and future, that they are the guardians of family goodwill. Nancy Chodorow has argued that the reproduction of femininity from one generation to the next is contingent on women's identification vertically within the family — with mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. Boys, on the other hand, tend to identify horizontally, with playmates and peers. Thus, even small girls are treated as "little women", while men of 50 or 60 are treated as boys. This learning of the importance of context means that women more often than men, in the words of Jean Baker Miller, "stay with, build on and develop in a context of affiliation with others". Indeed, "women's sense of self is very much organized around being able to make and maintain affiliations and relationships" (Miller, 1976:83).

This learning of contextualization enables women to acknowledge their connections to others, maybe even to others they will never meet. For example, women in recent times and at many points in history, have been at the forefront of movements for peace and social justice. Women in Great Britain and New York have staged massive months-long peace camps — invisible to many of us because of the limited news coverage they have received. In South Africa, for example, women form the heart of the social movement against Apartheid. At Big Mountain in New Mexico where Navajos are being forcibly relocated, the grandmothers are leading the resistance. But the capacity to contextualize may be crucial as well, in the larger realm of today's enormous and challenging world problems. Quoting Ursula Franklin again, "The major problems we face in the world today seem resolvable only in

context" (*CAUT Bulletin*, December 1986). Women's learned ways of seeing and being may make our perspectives vital for the continuity of the world, however overlooked they seem to be in the way the world is run at present.

Women are also permitted more flexibility in developing their spiritual sides than men. The traditional foundations of religion, for example, such as overcoming fear and anxiety, celebration of human events and achievements, and the supporting of social norms and values, fit easily together with women's learned gender identities. The church manifests, or at least claims to manifest, feminine ideals such as caring, humility, belief in something greater than oneself and, very importantly, connectedness. Not surprising then that women more often than men are found in church attendance and expressing their spiritual sides in numerous ways. The irony, of course, is that some churches have come to exclude and demean the very people who represent the ideals they claim to value, by denying women places in the clergy. When God invented church hierarchies, she must have been having a bad day indeed!

The affinity of women's gender identities and spirituality takes a couple of odd twists, however, when examined more closely. In many societies, including our own to a limited extent, women's spiritual expression may be highly threatening and cause for suspicion. In some African villages, for example, women are thought dangerous because they live longer than men, and so are segregated from other villagers. Women were the ones burned at the stake as witches in New England and in Europe. Their spirituality was not the acceptable kind. At the time of the scientific and industrial revolution, women's knowledge became suspect and was denied. Any woman defying the norm was called a Sibyl and punished. In our modern, sophisticated world we easily scoff at what women say as being "old wives tales" or based on intuition rather than real knowledge. In these various ways, women's inclinations toward spiritual expression and connectedness of people with each other and with nature are mocked and come to be controlled by men.

The development of context-sense in women has a distinctly negative aspect too. Women become imbedded in society's "shoulds". They are taught not to ask what they want or need but what others need *from* them. This, in

combination with their spiritual inclinations, makes them perfect choices to be the church's handmaidens, who do the thankless work but cannot be called to the ministry. The church, unfortunately, all too often reinforces the "should" system for women. The church becomes the mirror of women's learned sense of obligation and commitment to others, ahead of their obligations to themselves. It reinforces their sense of inadequacy in that a person who must exist only to serve others cannot be a full person, but only a shadow of a person. The roots of depression and outrage among women are sown. As Michele Landsberg stated in one of her *Globe and Mail* articles, "more men seem to have antibodies against the infection of inadequacy".

When social and economic structural forces are combined with socially-defined gender roles, the result is women and men who come to sexual relationships with profoundly different perspectives, expectations and resources. Some writers, including some sociologists, have explained these differences by simply saying that women are socialized for romance, with the help of Harlequin novels, and men are socialized for sex, with help from magazines sold in corner milk stores, adult video stores and adult book stores. This may be true, but it seems too simple. Men and women are almost totally different when they enter a bedroom. Men, for example, more often are working with hockey images and the bravado of self-assurance that goes with an athletic event. Women, on average, are more focussed on caring and giving, but also are distinctly lacking in confidence about themselves and their bodies. Michele Landsberg notes, "We have so internalized the male demand for perfect bodies that the ache of inadequacy is as familiar a strain in female life as the monthly cycle". Women's and men's economic resources also differ enormously, even in Canada in the late 1980's. Women might realize that their own employment and promotion prospects to say nothing of pay prospects, are dismal compared to those of men, even relatively incompetent men. This means that marriage or a permanent sexual relationship may be seen by women as an economic arrangement, a means of attaining a better standard of living than one could on one's own. Women further are taught about the importance of fidelity through the terrible experience of possibly endangering one's "reputation" in high school or university, still a

reality in these seemingly permissive times. So, women are going through conflict, self-appraisal, economic and social calculations about the implications of sexual activity, while men are thinking largely in terms of hockey! Under these circumstances, which I emphasize again are socially constructed, it is impossible to image any kind of free and egalitarian expression of sexuality.

Men's ways of being sexual and being spiritual, have a way of asserting themselves over women's ways of being sexual and spiritual. In part, this is because of the power imbalance present still in our society and in social institutions such as church and family. In part, however, it is because men have largely set up the system as it is and serve as the judges of its workability. There is another reason, however, that is often overlooked — perhaps because it is so obvious. For men and for women:

there are two different worlds with very little cross-reference from one to the other: each with its different ways and different standards, its different framework of normality. Women cross the barriers easily — they are required to by marriage, moving house, changing status [and now of course by working for and with men on terms set out by men]. Men seldom cross the barriers. They go on as they began, their lives under their own control.

(Weldon, 1978:171)

## SEXUALITY-SPIRITUALITY LINKS IN GENDERED SOCIETY

I would like to turn now to an examination of some of the ways sexuality and spirituality are linked in our gendered society. There are many links, all guided by culture, social learning and male and female gender identities. Only a few can be addressed here.

Perhaps the oldest perceived link of sexuality and spirituality, still alive and well in our modern world is the careful separation and segregation of the two. For women the images are clear — the virgin and the prostitute. One is the antithesis of the other; the virgin linked to spirituality, the prostitute to sensuality or sexuality. For men, it is more difficult to fall from grace all by oneself — as one might expect somehow — but with a women to tempt you, it

is much easier and more likely. Hence the simultaneous emergence of the image of woman as temptress, and the idea of celibacy for a higher spiritual purpose. Interestingly enough this archaic idea is still kicking in the halls of academia. The ivory tower has long modelled itself on monastic life — initiation rites, long black flowing robes for use in ceremony, pomp and elevation beyond most ordinary mortals in the search for untainted truth (in this case often scientific truth, which has been called the new religion) and ... the idea that males with their eyes on lofty ideas, often see themselves as dragged down by the more worldly interests of women. This latter concern takes various forms such as "If Einstein had had a nagging wife, he never would have done what he did".

Another link between spirituality and sexuality is that church work is seen as a safe outlet for strong feelings, even sexual feelings, that cannot be legitimately expressed elsewhere. This, of course, tends to be more true for women than for men, except perhaps for male priests. Sometimes this expression of feelings is simply repressed under starched collars and the doing of God's work. Sometimes, however, it is explicitly expressed by frenzied dancing, singing, speaking in tongues or even sacred snake-handling. Surely, Freudians would have a picnic with the snake-handlers of the Appalachians! The more suppressed or repressed sexuality is expected to be, the more likely that it will take the form of expression through the more legitimate spirituality. Sexual attraction by women to male spiritual super-heroes might be another way of expressing repressed sexuality through spirituality. What comes immediately to mind here is the line from Jesus Christ Superstar, "I don't know how to love him", surely a deliberately ambiguous statement. In people's older or twilight years, as we are now euphemistically terming the years after 60 or 65, more active spirituality is seen as a substitute for declining interest in things of the flesh.

One of the most perverted links between sexuality and spirituality, however, comes from the New Right. This is manifested in the growth of revivalist religions, the politicization of religion and the religionization of politics. As Canadians, we can be pleased, I think, that this process is much more advanced and bizarre in the States than it is here. We can hope that it will run its course so that

Canadians can learn how *not* to emulate the U.S. in their mistakes. The New Right sees a unilinear link between spirituality and sexuality. Women are instruments of God's will, or temptresses, or both, and must be kept firmly under the control of the family. Women's roles are to provide happiness to men and children at home. Hopefully this will bring them happiness too, but if it doesn't, they must suffer for the larger cause. Women's needs, both spiritual and sexual, are seen as largely non-existent or secondary to men's needs. Dissatisfactions in either realm are hardly uttered by women for fear of ostracism from the group or going against the will of God.

#### WHAT THE FUTURE MIGHT HOLD

In spite of the pressures of social learning, social expectations and social structures, the winds of change are blowing through many belfries. In part, these pushes for change have emanated from the concerns of feminists and humanists who have expressed deep concerns about the possible harm done by our present day views of women and of men, which stifle in more ways than they liberate. In part, the changes have come from those who are choosing to leave organized religion, churches, temples and mosques because church organization and beliefs do not encourage development of full selves. The recent MacLean's magazine public opinion poll reveals that most Canadians are not concerned at all about people leaving organized religion (December 1986). But perhaps most importantly of all, we are all beginning to recognize that thinking in terms of strict dichotomies or dualisms whether female/male, sacred/secular, spiritual/mundane, sexual/non-sexual, is cramping our visions of what can be. The major problems of the world today including poverty, starvation, exploitation, violence, pollution, alienation and the threat of nuclear annihilation, are so complex, so threatening to us, that to stifle creative thinking about these challenges in any way is to increase our peril.

We are realizing further that we are not only inhibiting our best efforts by our rigid and inflexible ways of seeing and acting, but that the pressing world problems we face today are in fact a direct product, to some degree, of our gender-structured society. As Julie Brickman eloquently puts it, "mainstream culture is skewed dangerously towards a competitive,

aggressive, hierarchical win-or-lose way of being in the world" (Brickman, 1981:61). There is, without doubt, a strong macho element in the arms race, in world leaders staring each other down to see who blinks first, in overlooking the human costs of industrialization, and in technological innovation without attention to human needs. Whether or not this can be tempered by, as Brickman suggests, "bringing the traditional strengths of women (nurturance, caregiving, flexibility, responsiveness, relatedness, empathy, depth of feeling, altruism, warmth, creativity and spirituality) from the private into the public arena" (1981:61) remains to be seen. An attempt, however, from this vantage point, seems more worthwhile than continuing further down a well-trodden path that we know can lead, and has led, to disaster.

As with any new idea or new way of thinking, the uprooting of traditional views of gender, sexuality and spirituality is not being welcomed wholeheartedly. New ideas are threatening to the status quo. Movements crop up to defeat them. In our world, movements exist for the restoration of the traditional patriarchal family, sometimes disguised as providing priority to the "rights" of the family over the rights of women. Similar and overlapping movements exist to make men men again (one wonders what they are now, if not men!) and women women. One such group in the latter category is called M.O.M. (Men our Masters) and has as its rallying cry, "The lambchop is mightier than the karate chop!". Other groups openly advocate wives decking themselves out in saranwrap and feathers (and nothing else) to meet their hard-working husbands at the door. The hope, explicitly spelled out, is to trade sexual favours for a new dishwasher or a furcoat, which, if you are overheard *communicating* about it, is grounds for arrest by the RCMP or local police!

Despite the extremism of some of these movements to bring back a past they wish existed, rather than one that actually existed, and despite the support they have, or seem to have, in some circles (even government circles), changed ways of thinking and being have crept into the mainstream. To be quite cynical, this may be part of the old notion that if you can't defeat them or ignore them, you might as well assimilate them. But it is, without doubt, a clear statement too, that the time for social change has come for *both* women and for men.

The old monotonic images of sexuality and spirituality, of men and of women hemmed in by social constraints, are no longer inviting to very many of us, if we are honest with ourselves. Unquestioned subordination of people to deities and to church hierarchies, of caring to socially sanctioned sexual exploitation of each other, of one's own spirituality and sexuality for the sake of conformance — that subordination is ending. It may not be the selfishness of the "me generation" that explains this, as so many media pundits would have us believe, but growing recognition that expression of our sexuality in caring terms, and our spirituality, in the sense of acknowledging our place in the universe and our connectedness with other people and with nature, are at the core of what makes us human. To pervert those expressions can bring nothing but pain and torment to each of us as individuals, but also to the world we all share.

The vision I have is of a world in which the best of what women and men are can converge and develop its own hybrid vigour. Just now, what that means is toning down masculine rhetoric and dominance so that feminine strengths can thrive and become something to be sought rather than feared by both men and women. It would be a world in which the quest for justice and understanding becomes something other than the overcoming of defensive resistances. It would be a world in which our spirituality, however expressed, could become an empowering force rather than a divisive one. And, lastly, it would be a world in which ambiguity and poetry could prosper, and the starkness of black and white dualisms would disappear.

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